



## Five Quick Ways to Trim— and Improve—Business Writing

by John Clayton

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At a time when we're all working "smarter and faster" and the Internet has dramatically changed how people read and absorb information, business writing needs to be relentlessly concise. And yet it has to deliver complex information clearly and persuasively.

If you're like most people, you probably find that once you have all the crucial information down, your document is at least twice as long as it should be. Whether you're writing an e-mail message, a project description limited to 200 words, or an executive summary of a complex report, your challenge is the same: cut length without losing meaning. Here are some quick, effective ways to do this.

And there's a bonus: As you trim excess words, format for readability, and replace generalizations with specifics, you'll also improve your writing—a lot.

## 1. EXAMINE THE STRUCTURE

Which parts form the foundation or support the roof, and which can be cut away without collapsing the whole structure?

The old advice about previewing and then reviewing your message may still be fine for lengthy reports, but for most business writing, this amounts to building three walls where one will do. Don't announce what you will say—just say it.

For example, you may have followed your English teacher's advice to include in your introductory paragraph one sentence touching on each point you will make. Here's an easy cut: Delete the introductory paragraph and jump right into the message.

Additionally, the foundation you built may be more substantial than you need. For example, maybe you've included detailed background information. Does your audience need this in order to understand and be persuaded by your argument? If not, summarize it briefly and get right to the heart of your message.

Consider cutting anything that illuminates something other than your main point. And if a section exists mostly for show, it should go.

## 2. STICK TO SPECIFICS

Specifics are the meat of your message, and generalizations the carbs. Put your writing on a high-protein, low-carb diet. A good anecdote or statistic will stay with your audience longer than a generalization and better convey your message. Think of how politicians, in speeches or debates, devote precious time to anecdotes. They know that telling a story (about a wounded soldier, a laid-off worker, or a creative entrepreneur) is often the best way to make a persuasive argument (for better weapons, more unemployment insurance, lower business taxes).

## 3. FORMAT FOR QUICK UNDERSTANDING

Graphical elements—headings, bullets, and tables—can help you convey your message in fewer words.

- **Headings and bullets.** Headings are useful because they emphasize your main points, eliminate the need for topic sentences, create white space, and help readers skim. But the way they're usually formatted—on a line by themselves, sometimes with a blank line following—takes up a lot of space. If you want to save space without losing the headings, convert them to run-in headings like the one at the beginning of this paragraph.

Like headings, bullets help readers skim. They also encourage you, the writer, to "chunk" information into small, digestible bites, as in this list.

- **Tables.** To compare and contrast various options, use a table rather than running text. You won't have to keep repeating the names of different companies, for instance, or the criteria on which you're judging them. More important, a table presents complex comparisons in a succinct way. Your readers can compare A and B, B and D, or A, B, and C as they please; you don't have to explain all the similarities and differences between them. An added bonus: Your audience's expectations change when they look at tables. They don't expect complete sentences, and they're willing to read text in a smaller font.

- **Maps and diagrams.** Think how long it takes to write out directions: *Maple St. is the third stoplight. There's a*

## Is Following the Rules Tripping Up Your Message?

by Christina Bielaszka-DuVernay

Will the sky fall if you end a sentence with a preposition? Will time stop if you split an infinitive? No, of course not.

In fact, your most sophisticated readers won't even bat an eye. And it's not because they've become so accustomed to the shortcuts and improvisations of e-mail that they don't notice when someone breaks a rule. They still notice, all right. It's just that they know that some "rules" aren't rules at all—and never were.

These nonrules are known as "superstitions" among the grammar and usage set, and they may be preventing your writing from being as strong, direct, and effective as it can be. Here are the four most common ones:

**1. Never end a sentence with a preposition.** This is one of the most enduring of superstitions, despite centuries of commentary trying to dispel it.

The origins of this bugaboo lie in etymology and the origins of English grammar, explains Bryan A. Garner, widely respected language authority and author of the excellent *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

In Latin, preposition means "stand before," and in Latin, a preposition does indeed stand before other words; it's the one part of speech that can't end a Latin sentence.

But English is not Latin. Although English grammar is modeled on Latin grammar, the languages are very different, and some rules just don't translate well.

Criticized for ending a sentence with a preposition, Winston Churchill is said to have quipped, "That is the type of arrant pedantry up with which I shall not put." As this absurdly stilted sentence demonstrates, the syntactical contortions necessary to keep a sentence ending preposition-free result in awkward, turgid prose—not the best vehicle for your message.

**2. Never split an infinitive.** The fact is, some infinitives beg to

be split. Consider this sentence: *Our CEO expects to more than double revenues this year.*

Try rewriting it so as to eliminate the split infinitive; there's no way to do it without losing the precise meaning of the original.

Here is another example: *We are trying to immediately solve any customer-service problems that arise.*

Transposing *to* and *immediately* changes the meaning—*immediately* now modifies *are trying*. Placing *immediately* after *solve* makes the sentence stilted. And moving *immediately* to the end of the sentence is no good, because there it appears to modify *arise*.

With split infinitives, the best bet is to steer a middle course. If you can avoid a split infinitive without altering meaning, introducing ambiguity, or interrupting flow, you should do so, advises Garner.

**3. Never begin a sentence with *and* or *but*.** Go ahead and do it—you'll be in good company. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites sentences beginning with *and* that date back to the 10th century.

A scholar in the 1960s, says Garner, studied the work of top-flight writers—H.L. Mencken and Lionel Trilling among them—and found that nearly 9% of their sentences began with *and* or *but*. Garner's own research has turned up similar results.

Some writers substitute *however* for *but* at the beginning of a sentence, believing that by so doing they're hewing to the grammatical line. What they're doing is stalling the progress of their prose. *But* at the beginning of a sentence keeps things zipping nicely along, while *however*—followed by its obligatory comma—is a verbal speed bump, jarring the reader and slowing him down.

**4. Never write a one-sentence paragraph.** Varied paragraph length, like varied sentence length, is a hallmark of a skilled stylist. Writing a one-sentence paragraph is an excellent way to grab the reader's attention or emphasize an important point.

Just don't overdo it.

*Denny's on one corner and a used-car lot on the other corner, but if you get to the Clarksdale city limits, you've gone too far.* A map conveys the same information concisely and accessibly. Flowcharts, graphs, and diagrams likewise convey complex relationships in easy-to-understand forms.

■ **Emphasis.** To make sure your audience remembers what you have to say, you may be tempted to use phrases like *This is the most important point* or *If you take one message away from this document, let it be the following.*

Instead, put your main point in boldface to convey its importance visually.

## 4. DOWNSHIFT YOUR TONE

Writing to a business audience can cause even the best writers to adopt a formal, bureaucratic tone. When you write this way, you use bigger words, more complex constructions, and longer sentences. If you shift to an informal tone, you'll naturally write more concisely.

Here's a place to start. Use contractions. Changing *will not* to *won't* and *cannot* to *can't* won't save much space,

but using contractions will help you avoid the wordy, formal style of bureaucrats, explains Edward P. Bailey in *Plain English at Work: A Guide to Writing and Speaking* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

## 5. CUT AND COMBINE

Go over your document sentence by sentence, looking for ways to cut words by combining two sentences into one. Consider this passage: *This presentation examines the benefits of outsourcing. It is my recommendation that we reduce overhead by outsourcing noncore processes such as customer service, fulfillment, and other support functions.*

The first sentence is dead weight. Delete it and write: *We could significantly reduce overhead by outsourcing such noncore support functions as customer service and fulfillment.*

You've now announced your topic and stated your position with wording that's almost 50% leaner than the original.

Here are some other ways to crop words:

- **Drop lengthy titles.** Rather than *Bob Smith, Vice President for Corporate Communications and Government Relations, says...*, you could write *spokesperson Bob Smith says...*
- **Look out for the obvious.** Rather than writing, *Obviously, this means we will need to raise prices, which could reduce sales*, write, *Our need to raise prices could*

*reduce sales*. Do a search for the word *obvious*, and see if the sentences in which it appears can be trimmed down. After all, if something is obvious, why waste precious space saying it?

- **Convert “of” phrases to possessives.** For example, change *the success of the company* to *the company's success*.
- **Replace bloated phrases with simpler words.** *An adequate number of* can be replaced with *enough*, *notwithstanding the fact that* is a windy way of saying *although*, and *during such time as* simply means *while*.

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By applying these tips, you can create documents that are not only shorter but more readable and persuasive. ♦

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